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Iran's actions during hijacking questioned despite rescue effort

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The Reagan administration yesterday suggested it remains skeptical of Iran's behavior during the terrorist hijacking of a Kuwaiti jet despite the storming of the plane by Iranian security forces, who captured the hijackers and freed the seven hostages aboard.

Both at the White House and at the State Department there were congratulations for Kuwait, which steadfastly resisted the terrorists' demands, and an absence of praise for the actions of the Islamic fundamentalist regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

At the White House, presidential spokesman Larry Speakes said he had "no comment" on Iran's freeing of the hostages.

And President Reagan himself refrained from talking about Iran's role, focusing his remarks instead on religious persecution in Iran.

"We Americans recognize a special responsibility to speak for the oppressed wherever they may be," Mr. Reagan said in remarks to several hundred people invited to a White House ceremony marking the beginning of Human Rights Week. "We think here of special cases like the persecution of the Bahai religious minority in Iran."

President Reagan said Friday before the remaining seven hostages were rescued that Iran had not been as helpful as it could have been in ending the hijacking.

Meanwhile, an Iranian official said yesterday in Tehran that a trial would be held for the four men who hijacked the Kuwaiti plane with 169 people aboard.

U.S. State Department spokesman John Hughes said in Washington that the U.S. expected Iran to "carry out its obligation to try them or take them to a country where they would be tried."

Mr. Hughes said the U.S. hopes to interview the two Americans when they leave Iran, which he said would be some time today. Mr. Hughes

said the administration had agreed that the two Americans should be kept under medical supervision in Iran for 24 hours before being allowed to travel.

He said the U.S. would like to find out more details of the hijacking from the two before assessing what role, if any, the Shi'ite Iranian government may have played in the incident.

Some observers thought it curious that the hijackers reportedly asked the Iranian government to send some people to clean the plane after they announced plans to blow it up.

The Iranian government said that security troops disguised as a cleanup crew surprised and captured the hijackers and freed the hostages.

There was still no word from Iranian authorities yesterday on the names or nationalities of the four hijackers, all of whom spoke Arabic.

They were believed to be associated with a radical Shi'ite Moslem group responsible for the bombings of the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait last year. Their major demand was the release of the 17 people — many of them Iranians — arrested in connection with the bombings of the U.S. embassy.

The hijackers repeatedly threatened to blow up themselves, their hostages and the plane, a warning that was taken seriously. On the first day of the hijacking they apparently shot and killed Charles A. Hegna, 50, an official of the U.S. Agency for International Development from Sterling, Va., and wounded a Kuwaiti guard.

The second American believed killed, William Stanford, 52, an AID official stationed in Karachi, was first forced to walk to the plane's landing steps Thursday and plead for his life through an amplifier. Then he was coldly gunned down and his body thrown from the plane.

The two surviving American passengers were identified by INRA as John Costa, a New York businessman, and Charles Kaper, also an AID official whose age and address were not given. Both were beaten and burned by the hijackers.

Mr. Costa told INRA that what the hijackers "wanted was for me to say I was from the CIA. . . That's all they wanted to hear.

"Among the places they kicked me was in the throat, which is why my voice is bad," Mr. Costa said.

"I told them point-blank I was not CIA," Mr. Kaper said. "I work for the Agency for International Development. I am an auditor. And that is my only job. And I kept telling them that. They kept telling me, 'No, you're not, you're this.' They kept insisting and they kept hitting me harder and harder.

"And then I told them point-blank, 'If you don't believe me, shoot me.'

"They dropped lit cigarettes down my shirt, front and back. They changed their behavior constantly. Those of us who were hostages were constantly off balance," said Mr. Kaper, who was unshaven, had a black eye and blood on his shirt.

"The [hijack] leader . . . was absolutely psycho, a crazy man," said John Harry Clark, the British pilot.

"They were all crazy men. They changed from real animal behavior to suddenly being very kind. It was sheer hell. It was terror for six solid days."